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SUBJECT: ELECTION COMMISSION MAKES COMPROMISE OFFER TO ODIHR

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns.
Reasons: 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: At a February 5 lunch meeting Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairman Churov told Ambassador he had suggested to ODIHR in talks February 3 - 4 that it send five logisticians to Moscow February 5, twenty longer-term observers February 7, and 55 observers February 20 to observe the March 2 presidential elections. Churov said that the CEC was prepared to be even more flexible than that, but he expected, after phone calls during the lunch with CEC colleagues who were in communication with ODIHR, that his compromise offer would be rejected. Churov hinted that a visit to Moscow over the weekend by ODIHR Director Strohal, instead of by his aides, might have induced greater CEC flexibility. Ambassador urged Churov to address ODIHR's concerns fully, and stressed that the U.S. would ultimately support ODIHR's judgment. As of Tuesday evening Moscow time, the Finnish Ambassador told Ambassador that ODIHR representatives were still engaged with Churov, and the Finns were "mildly optimistic" that a compromise might still emerge. End summary.

CEC Offers Compromise

¶2. (C) At a February 5 lunch with Ambassador, Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairman Churov insisted that he wanted ODIHR to monitor the March 2 presidential elections. In February 4 talks with ODIHR representatives Gerald Mitchell and Mats Lindberg, the CEC had tabled a compromise offer that ODIHR send five observer mission logisticians as early as February 5, followed by twenty long-term observers on February 7, and a final 55 observers on February 20. The offer, if accepted, would give the ODIHR observer team more time on the ground in advance of the elections than the original timetable proposed by the CEC. The main sticking point between the two appears to be whether the bulk of the observer team will arrive on February 15, as proposed by ODIHR, or February 20, as offered by the CEC.

¶3. (C) In phone calls with his staff during the lunch, Churov massaged CEC press guidance to keep the door open to ODIHR, although CEC staff members seemed to be telling him that ODIHR planned to reject the compromise timetable and not observe the March 2 presidential elections. (ODIHR had been unable to monitor the December 2 Duma contest after the CEC restricted the size of the observation mission and reduced the length of time it could spend in Russia in advance of election day.)

¶4. (C) While extending what he claimed to be an olive branch to the ODIHR, with whom he insisted he wanted to cooperate, Churov nevertheless alleged ODIHR had discredited itself in its observation of end-of-December elections in Georgia and the February 3 second round of the Serbian elections, where

the EU had "not even consulted with ODIHR before pronouncing the elections free and fair." Churov also hinted that, had ODIHR Chairman Strohal come to Moscow instead of sending two envoys, "who had only instructions and were not able to negotiate," the CEC might have shown greater flexibility.

15. (C) In his answer to Ambassador's question, Churov ascribed the refusal of Putin successor Dmitriy Medvedev to participate in on-going debates with Zyuganov, Zhirinovskiy, and Bogdanov to the absence of a culture of debate in Russia. "Candidates either scream at one another, or are absolutely boring," he said. One of the lessons learned from the December 2 contest, Churov said, was that less media exposure is better. He noted the relatively low-key advertisements for Medvedev to date and the somewhat more restrained coverage by the national media of the First Deputy Prime Minister's travels.

16. (C) Churov insisted that the December 2 Duma elections had been free and fair and dismissed the work of the NGO Golos, which had alleged widespread shortcomings in the conduct of the elections, as largely derived from unsubstantiated media reports. He contrasted Golos' observation work with that of the Communist Party which, Churov said, had fielded 30 thousand observers and examined 42 percent of the voting protocols in drawing its conclusions about the elections. Ambassador emphasized the importance the U.S. and many others attach to unfettered access for Golos and other local observers.
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